

SLOUCHING TOWARD BORK

The Culture Wars and Self-Criticism in Hip-Hop Music

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The appeal of hip-hop and rap music in the United States grew considerably in the early 1990s. A dynamic culture that had its beginnings among working class African Americans and Puerto Ricans in New York, hip-hop evolved into a multimillion-dollar industry with far-reaching influences in marketing, popular culture, and politics. Coterminous with this rise in popularity was the emergence of a highly visible campaign against rap artists for promoting offensive and socially irresponsible music. These attacks were the most visible battles in America's "culture wars" that pitted cultural critics against each other in the realms of music, cinema, and visual arts. Peaking in the years 1992 through 1996, this public discourse regarding cultural standards and hip-hop involved presidential candidates, congressmen, and academics who joined the chorus to condemn what they considered violent, sexist, and bigoted rap. Few, however, in the mainstream media or academia gave attention to the many in the hip-hop community who were also involved in the debates. In fact, many rap artists offered fresh analyses and observations of the culture wars from a unique perspective that necessarily presented nuances in the discussion that had been absent. This article examines these marginalized voices in the debates of the early- and mid-1990s. It studies the efficacy of these voices and reveals how they deviated from the typical parameters of the public debate.

In June 1995, William J. Bennett, former drug czar of the Bush administration and head of Empower America, and C. Delores



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Tucker, president of the National Political Congress of Black Women, publicly denounced Time Warner's involvement with "violent and misogynistic" music lyrics. The two condemned the media conglomerate's participation in "filth" that undermined the minds and morality of children (Reibstein, 1995, p. 30). That same month, Speaker of the U. S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich, suggested that advertisers boycott radio stations that play "vicious" music. "They could drive violent rap music off radio within weeks," Gingrich predicted (Lacayo, 1995, p. 28). Several weeks later, amid intense criticism from various politicians—most prominently, Kansas Senator Bob Dole—Time Warner announced that it had sold its 50% stake in Interscope Records, the label chiefly accused of promoting morally unsound gangsta rap (Samuels, 1995, p. 30).

The campaign against socially irresponsible music, led by Tucker, Dole, and others, was an extension of the culture wars, which reached new levels of activity in the early- and mid-1990s. More than any genre of music, hip-hop has felt the brunt of attack from a wide array of detractors who, for various reasons, have expressed outrage and disdain at what they considered inappropriate cultural expression. While the leading critics of the gangsta rappers gained the spotlight, many observers began to construct a monolithic view of hip-hop as an art form characterized by misogyny and violently hedonistic lyrics (Pareles, 1992, p. 1). Some heavy-metal groups have been accused of being rap acts, because they allegedly embody the violent and crude stereotypes generally associated with gangsta rappers (Shank, 1996, p. 131). The very diverse and complex world of hip-hop was thus reduced to a simple, one-dimensional art form devoid of serious political analysis and substantive cultural observations or social responsibility. In the midst of the culture wars surrounding hip-hop, there remain, however, very articulate and passionate voices of criticism from within the hip-hop community. From rappers to hip-hop magazine editors, many have criticized both the violent, hypermaterialistic, sexist gangsta and the politicians and culture critics who denounce rap music. Despite the prominence of some of these hip-hop critics, like Chuck D or KRS-One, they have been ignored during the

congressional hearings, protests, and boycotts organized by anti-gangsta rap zealots. This article examines the complexity of the culture wars from the center of the hip-hop community, focusing on the voices of those in hip-hop. Many of those who will be studied have both defended their art form and attacked those whom they considered threats—external and internal—to the integrity of hip-hop. Moreover, this article argues that the hip-hop community widely engages in a two-tiered critique of hip-hop and the culture wars. On one front, rappers direct criticism at their hypermaterialistic peers and, on another, disdain is directed at the capitalist society at large that copiously glorifies overconsumption and materialism. In addition, hip-hop artists attack sexism and violence in society at large as well as the misogynist and destructive lyrics of their peers.

Whereas some of the most outspoken critics of rap are prominent right wingers, critics of hip-hop span a wide political spectrum. Cultural war activists such as C. Delores Tucker, William Bennett, Rev. Calvin Butts, and Bob Dole run the gamut from liberal to conservative. Moreover, the discourse cannot be reduced to debates over Black cultural expression and White fears of cultural invasion. The discourse surrounding hip-hop music is much too dynamic and complex to be simplified with political labeling or racial simplification. The nature of the cultural debate is further complicated by the introduction of rappers who have offered a strident and unabashed denunciation of their hip-hop peers who have, according to some, exploited and bastardized a beloved art form.

Conservative political commentator and former Supreme Court nominee Robert H. Bork has been an outspoken critic of rap music, which, he asserts, is a reflection of the moral declension of the United States. Rap, he claims, helps push America “towards Gomorrah.” “It is difficult to convey just how debased rap is,” he notes. He blames the popularity of such “degenerate” music on “modern liberalism,” which is enamored of “radical individualism” and other values that are fundamentally hostile to American freedom (1996, pp. 130-131).

For anti-rap crusaders like Bork, rap is a monolithic genre of crude “noise with a beat,” little more than a “knuckle-dragging sub-pidgin of grunts and snarls, capable of fully expressing only the

more pointless forms of violence and the more brutal forms of sex” (1996, pp. 125, 133). Without doubt, Bork is at his worst when he pontificates about subjects about which he knows little. His insistence that rap lyrics are witless diatribes of barbarism further reflects his utter ignorance of the music or disingenuous agenda.

In fact, many rap songs grapple with issues of contention in society, imploring listeners to assume higher levels of moral and spiritual consciousness, as well as social responsibility. The platinum group De La Soul (1991), on its sophomore LP, *De La Soul is Dead*, speaks to the trauma experienced by victims of incest in “Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa.” In this song, a schoolmate, Millie, informs the rappers that her father, Dillon, has been “pushing on her privates.” Because Dillon is a well-liked schoolteacher who even volunteers to play Santa at Macy’s, they doubt the veracity of her story and refuse to help Millie. Instead, her friends ignore the signs of incest, insisting that Dillon is the “best pops that anyone could have. Girl you should be glad.” Driven to frustration at being unable to get sympathy or help, Millie ultimately shoots her father.¹

Although De La Soul and others, like the Grammy Award-winning group Digable Planets, have eloquently engaged such difficult subjects as incest, abortion, and even animal cruelty, many other rappers have consistently affirmed some of the most pernicious stereotypes of hip-hop. Lyrics that glorify violence against women and men, drug dealing, and other destructive behaviors provide critics like Bork a platform for attack. Although the general image of the gangsta rapper is a baggy pants-wearing, drive-by-shooting street thug, a new, nouveau riche style of gangsta rap has pervaded hip-hop since the mid-1990s.

Jay-Z, Foxy Brown, the Notorious B.I.G., Nas, and other rappers have helped romanticize organized crime “Mafia style.” Frequently dressing like mobsters of the 1940s in their videos, these Mafioso fan club members often name themselves after famous Italian or Colombian mobsters and make earnest attempts to be down with *la cosa nostra*. Nas “Escobar” released a 1996 video, “Street Dreams,” which was modeled after the 1995 hit mobster movie *Casino*. Snoop Doggy Dogg’s sophomore LP was titled *The Doggfather* (Snoop Dog, 1996), and, in his promotional ads, he used a lettering

style identical to the movie poster for the original *The Godfather* motion picture. The immensely popular and sexually lascivious Foxy Brown, in her debut LP *Ill Na Na* (Foxy Brown, 1996), indulges in extreme self-aggrandizement, promoting herself as “the murderess mommy” and baby girl of the “Firm,” a Mafioso-styled family that includes rappers AZ and Nas, among others. Clearly, these mobster lyrics have supplanted the gangsta, drive-by style that pervaded rap between 1992 and 1995.

Jay-Z (1996), who has performed with Foxy Brown, prides himself on his pimp–Mafia–drug-lord nature. The opening skit on his LP *Reasonable Doubt* depicts a Spanish-accented mobster arranging a purchase of 2 kilos of cocaine from Colombians. He later raps about a typical “Big Willie” life, complete with driving in a Lexus and bragging about having expensive “hoes” with expensive clothes, sipping fine wine and rapping with “a godfather flow.” Throughout his LP, Jay-Z revels in his fantasy mobster world of materialism and crime. In “Cashmere Thoughts,” he brags about his 14-karat gold pen, pearls, diamonds, and caviar. He also boasts about pimping. In “Feeling It,” Jay-Z raps that materialism is king. If people are not talking about “large money,” what’s the point? Such lyrics glorifying crime, destruction, and rabid materialism have given rap critics a growing following. Yet, these nouveau riche gangstas have not gone unchallenged by their hip-hop peers.

Jeru the Damaja (1996), a New York–based artist, shows no tolerance for the so-called “playas” of the rap game whom he calls “too perverted” for pushing lyrics that are “pure narcissism” by gangsta rappers and their producers. Rebuking the materialistic drives of some rappers, he explains that he does not drive a Lexus, and does not drink Cristal or Moët; instead, he “keeps it real.” The popularity of Mafioso groupie rap is not to be taken lightly, Jeru implies. In fact, in his song “One Day,” he discovers that hip-hop has been taken hostage by the opportunistic elements in the industry. In this song, Jeru sees a picture of Hip-Hop, anthropomorphized as a man, held hostage by a gang of hooded thugs. He can only identify Foxy Brown wearing “fake alligator boots.” Bad Boy Records is the one getting Hip-Hop drunk. When he arrives at the offices of Bad Boy, he is informed that Hip-Hop has been taken to Los Angeles

where Suge Knight, CEO of Death Row Records, will only turn him over to a “real nigga.” Jeru retrieves Hip-Hop the next day. Many other artists have been equally vitriolic about the rise of the hypermaterialistic elements in hip-hop.

The Roots, a Philadelphia-based rap group who performs with a live band, unleashed a barrage of rhymes criticizing the gaudy fantasy world of some rappers in their sophomore LP, *illadelph half-life*. In the video for “What They do” The Roots parody the ubiquitous materialism and Big Willie lifestyles of some rappers such as Jay-Z, the Notorious B.I.G., Junior M.A.F.I.A., and others. With a tip of the hat to De La Soul (who produced a similar video for “Ego Trippin” in 1994 and performs a cameo in the video), The Roots deride the make-believe world of some rap artists. The video opens with a shot of a mansion, with a caption that reads, “The Goldstein estate, day rental.” In one scene, the lead rapper sits on a bed with three beautiful women. “Yeah, right,” the screen reads. Sitting in front of high-priced automobiles, the caption asks, “Can we afford this?” (Roberts, 1997).

A Tribe Called Quest (1996) also offered rebuke of these exponents of hyperconsumerism in their LP, *Beats, Rhymes and Life*:

Hip-hop acts posing like fat cats
Lex and the Rolex, Moët and the top hat
Its time to turn the tables on this hip-hop fable
Gat-pulling MCs can never come near
Ninety per cent of all you suckas have filthy LPs
bitch’ this, trick’ that
Come on, act like you know.
I’m that MC who never chose to play the down low.²

In the summer of 1996, De La Soul (1996) also jumped into the fray: “It seems like every man and woman shares the life of John Gotti.” Disgusted, they declared that they were “sick of Versace glasses and name brand clothes/sick of swollen-head rappers with their sicker-than raps.”³

Whereas some artists, like De La Soul and Digable Planets, have consistently raised issues of political and social concern in their

music, others have offered a conspicuously conflictive bundle of messages and imagery in their musical approach. No major artist has embodied this straddling of social responsibility and glorification of pathology better than Los Angeles-based rapper Ice Cube. Moreover, Ice Cube has been one of the more visible characters in the ongoing culture wars by engaging in spirited and highly controversial disputes on wax.

Ice Cube emerged in the late 1980s as a writer and rapper for the pioneering gangsta rap group N.W.A. After his break from the group in 1989, he impressed rap fans nationwide with his platinum debut solo album, *Amerikkka's Most Wanted* (1990). In this album, he deals with a number of social issues of concern, including racism in law enforcement and sexual irresponsibility. In "You Can't Fade Me," Ice Cube raps about the anxiety of teenage pregnancy. However, what may appear as a socially responsible gesture is less clearly so when the character Cube plays in the song laments the possibility of being the father of a child born to a neighborhood "ho." He raps that he considered giving up the money but also considered kicking her in the stomach. In the end, the baby is not his. The song demonstrates that there are obvious consequences to being the "mack," although his vile display of disrespect and sexism is not explicitly condemned in his lyrics.

Crude and misogynist lyrics appear throughout Ice Cube's four solo albums released between 1990 and 1993. Despite the utter vulgarity of some songs, he has insisted that the fundamental thrust of his work is socially responsible and only utilizes vulgarities in order to communicate with people who would otherwise be disinterested.

After coming under the influence of the Nation of Islam, Ice Cube's second full-length CD, *Death Certificate* (1991), came closest to a pro-Black position that did not denigrate Black women. His CD, which was the first rap CD to debut at Number 1 on *Billboard's* pop chart, is divided into the "Death Side" and the "Life Side." The former is the epitome of Black people's confusion and ignorance, replete with drug dealing, violence, misogyny, and all sorts of criminal and self-destructive behavior. The Life Side, however, is "where black people need to go." He implores Black

people to resist co-option with their oppressors in “True to the Game.” Black people are excoriated for partaking in their own oppression on “Us,” where Cube offers a classic Nation of Islam–style vilification of Black people for careless and irresponsible behavior. And, in “Black Korea,” he discusses the tensions between the Black and Korean communities in Los Angeles. If these tensions are not mitigated, warns Cube, these stores could be “burned to a crisp.” This is not the only song that eerily predicts the Los Angeles Rebellion that would occur a year later. In “I Wanna Kill Sam” and “Horny Lil Devil,” he blasts White America for, among other things, kidnapping, enslaving, raping, and oppressing Black people for centuries. With such continuous oppression, he warns, get ready for “Watts Riot, 1991.” A year later, Los Angeles exploded, and Ice Cube created the strongest, most sagacious, and artistically brilliant look at the L.A. rebellion through the lens of music on his 1992 CD, *The Predator*.

Cube’s (1992) third CD covers the L.A. rebellion on four songs and includes a sample from an interview with a reporter where Cube explains that, if one studied the Ice Cube “library,” he or she would notice Cube’s warning regarding the rebellion. On *The Predator*, he blasts his critics, including *Billboard Magazine*, which offered an unprecedented denunciation of an LP. *Death Certificate* was accused by *Billboard Magazine* of making anti-Semitic remarks because of Cube’s verbal assault against his former group N.W.A. and its White Jewish manager, who, along with N.W.A. leader Eazy-E, Cube had long accused of exploiting the group.

Being the quintessential gangsta, Ice Cube (1992) responded to his critics bluntly: “Fuck *Billboard* and the editor.” Cube’s brash confidence and temerity regarding allegations that he is anti-Semitic and anti-Korean are further demonstrated on an inserted sample from an actual interview in which an interviewer asks Cube about these charges. “Fuck ‘em,” is the answer, actually sampled from another song, leaving the listener to ponder how Cube really answered the allegations.

Cube’s (1992) most brilliant cut is perhaps “We Had to Tear This _____ Up,” where he offers his listeners a “ground zero” account of the L.A. rebellion. He begins with a news reporter’s

announcement of the "not guilty" verdicts in the trial of the four Los Angeles police officers who were videotaped beating motorist Rodney King. When the news gets to the Black community, Black people will be livid, Cube warns. In the song, he portrays a vigilante who goes to Simi Valley (the location of the trial) to find the "Grand Wizard." He is also on a mission to hunt acquitted officers Stacy Koon, Lawrence Powell, and Timothy Wind. Cube admonishes looters to avoid the Black-owned stores but be sure to hit White businesses. In a response to his critics, Cube gives up an "I told you so!" Although he was accused of being anti-Semitic, he complains, his critics overlooked the relevance of his scathing social commentary.

Despite his approval of the L.A. urban unrest, Cube (1992) does not consider spontaneous urban rebellion a panacea for racial oppression. Riots, he states, are just "diets" for the system. In the final analysis, Cube claims that, in order for Blacks to realize justice, they had to tear the city up.

Certainly Ice Cube engages in serious social and political commentary and expresses pro-Black positions. Yet, throughout his LP, Cube (1992) demonstrates a ruthless propensity to glorify misogyny. In "Don't Trust 'em" Cube warns that "you can't trust no bitch." Women may sexually entice men with the insidious intention of robbery or murder, he warns. Even in the liner notes, he acknowledges "white America's continued commitment to the silence and oppression of black men," and America's cops' "systematic and brutal killings of brothers all over the country." Women activists who have experienced state-sponsored repression such as Angela Davis, Assata Shakur, Ericka Huggins, Fanny Lou Hammer, or others are conspicuously absent. The memory of women killed by the police, such as Eula Mae Love and Eleanor Bumpers, is also overlooked. It is clear that Cube employs a narrow view of Black liberation. In essence, it is an advocacy of the liberation of Black men, not Black people. His incessant use of misogynist lyrics and dismissal of women as agents of resistance to oppression are palpable. At the same time, Cube teases his listeners with bits of gender consciousness by proclaiming that he has a Black woman for a manager, and "not in the kitchen."

In 1991, he invited female rapper Yo Yo to a verbal challenge of his sexism. In "It's a Man's World," she criticizes him for his wide use of sexist lyrics and, while battling him on the mic, challenges his manhood, even questioning the size of his penis. Whereas Yo Yo presents herself as the "intelligent black woman" who resists sexist lyrics and even challenges the manhood of misogynist rappers, her feminist rhetoric is couched in caustic discourse with Ice Cube, an unabashed male chauvinist pig. Cube's studio persona ostensibly represents the vile, narrow-minded sexist; however, Cube produced Yo Yo, invited her on his LP, and provided an arena of artistic discourse that would offer a challenge to his vile lyrics, from the vantage of a womanist position. The irony is clear.

Artists such as Ice Cube represent a hyperbolic look at societal pathologies like misogyny and violence through the construction of first-person narrative. It is popularly known that, in his personal life, Ice Cube divorces himself from his studio gangsta alter ego. In reality, O'Shea Jackson lives in a wealthy White neighborhood, in a gated home, with his wife and three children. He comes from a two-parent home in a middle-class residential area of south central Los Angeles, has never been in prison, graduated from Taft High School, the wealthiest high school in the Los Angeles Unified School District, and immediately went to college. He left college to pursue his music career with N.W.A. in 1988 (Larkin, 1995, pp. 2052-2053; "From Boyz to Man", 1997, pp. 20-23).

Ice Cube, as sexist rapper, assumes a carefully contrived studio persona. His real-life identity as law-abiding, millionaire producer, actor, and director provides a challenge to his own artistic expression, in the case of Yo Yo. Still, Cube never divorces himself from his sexist lyrics. Much of the same characterizes his fourth platinum CD, *Lethal Injection*. In 1996, however, with the decline of politically conscious Black militant hip-hop, Ice Cube joined with rappers W.C. and Mack 10 to form Westside Connection, an unabashed gangsta rap group.

Westside Connection (1996) brings together incredible talent and potential. W.C. and Mack 10 are popular in their own right. The former offered a "street consciousness" similar to Ice Cube's in his work with the Madd Circle. Mack 10 went gold with his debut LP,

For Life. Together, the three abandon all remnants of Black liberation and pro-Black lyrics. Instead, they copiously glorify drug dealing, killing, and the oppression of women. Calling themselves the gangsta, the killa, and the dope dealer, they deride the efforts of rappers to mitigate hip-hop's east coast-west coast rivalries. Boasting of his ability to murder people, W.C. claims that he plans to kill every "nigga" outside. Cube ups the ante of his sexism in graphic lyrics about sexually conquering a woman with 12 friends. Mack 10, in "Westward Ho," raps about taking any beautiful woman he happens to see, even if she is with a man. Such crude, vile, and pernicious lyrics provide arsenal for those like Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker who attack gangsta rap.

In a May 1995 speech, presidential candidate Bob Dole blasted similar lyrics and record companies for promoting such music. These companies, Dole argued, must be attacked for the "marketing of evil through commerce." He condemned businesses that benefit "from extolling the pleasures of raping, torturing and mutilating women, from songs about killing policemen and rejecting law." ("Senator Bob Dole Sets it Off," 1995). Whereas Dole centered much of his attack on record companies (mainly Time Warner) for promoting gangsta rap, C. Delores Tucker emerged as an outspoken critic of individual rappers as well as their companies. For her, the artists bear the brunt of the responsibility for such lyrics.

Tucker ("Tucker Calls for Restrictions," 1995), a leader of a women's organization, is particularly sensitive to anti-woman lyrics. The sexist violence in these songs should not be dismissed, she warns. Sexist and violent gangsta rap, she insists, has produced a cultural standard of cool among youth that glorifies criminality. "The rap talks about the life in the ghetto and makes it sound so good and so real" (p. 2), Tucker explains. "It puts people in the position of the gangster. Everyone accepts it and puts themselves in the video because of the misconception that [being a gangster] is the only way to be somebody" (p. 2). Tucker has not equivocated on her stance that gangsta rap breeds self-destruction among the youth who listen. "[Children] are walking time bombs and gangsta rap is the origin of these time bombs. They are recruiting more and more

young children. The cost to community is just too great" (p. 2). Although the influence that hip-hop culture plays on youth cannot be overlooked, sexism and violence pervade American society and popular culture. Also, youth violence predates gangsta rap. Tucker, Dole, Bork, and others remain quiet on the pervasive nature of the poverty, despair, and misery in the urban communities that produce such gangsta rap lyrics that describe social pathologies. In addition, rap by no means has a monopoly on sexism in society at large. However, many in hip-hop have also become disturbed by the prominence of violent and sexist gangsta rappers. But unlike the culture war crusaders like Bork and others, these critics have choice words for the American status quo.

The consummate politically charged rap group, Public Enemy, released its fifth album, *Muse Sick N Hour Mess Age*, in 1994, with the unabashed Black militancy that characterizes its previous CDs. The group railed against gangsta rappers as "slaves" to the rhythm of the master for their glorification of pathology and destruction at the behest of the White power structure. In that same year, Paris (1994), an Oakland-based rapper, unleashed a lyrical attack against studio gangsta rappers as "fake-ass wanna-bes" who have been enthralled with being gangstas, which he calls a "house nigga" mentality. Paris accuses these gangsta rappers of being "Uncle Toms" who have been co-opted by racist record companies who could care less about anti-Black rappers.

Perhaps Paris's (1994) most scathing critique of gangsta rappers is his song "40 Ounces and a Fool." In this song, Paris performs an incredibly convincing impression of gangsta rap golden child Snoop Doggy Dogg who, in 1993, became the only new musical artist to debut at Number 1 on Billboard's pop charts. Paris' pseudo-Snoop calls himself "the man with no conscience" who, with money from the record company, is on his way to the liquor store to help promote drunken debauchery to Black people.

Paris's (1994) parody of Snoop was not so much a personal attack as it was a reflection of his disdain for the popularity of gangsta rap and gangsta rappers who, like Snoop, Ice Cube, and others, work for corporate America as salesmen: In malt liquor commercials or in songs such as "Gin and Juice," Snoop's immensely

popular song glorifying drinking, driving, and smoking marijuana. Paris was not the only Bay Area rapper to take a swipe at Snoop and gangsta rap.

The Coup, an Oakland-based group influenced by Karl Marx, Frantz Fanon, and Huey Newton and the Black Panther Party's intercommunalist theories of class struggle, produced *Genocide and Juice* in 1994, a strong follow-up to their 1993 debut album, *Kill my Landlord*. Their sophomore LP title was a salient critique of Snoop's platinum single. The CD, however, was much more attuned to systemic oppression, with humorous, insightful, and creative songs on class struggle and racism. The first three songs are a trilogy depicting a day in the life of a poor Black man who decides to partake in the redistribution of wealth by infiltrating a highbrow dinner of America's wealthy capitalist elite. In "Fat Cats, Bigga Fish," Boots, the rapper, poses as a waiter and overhears the conversation of the owner of Coca Cola bottling who implores the Black mayor of Oakland to clear out low-income housing to make way for condominiums. In return, the millionaire will front the money for the mayor's reelection campaign. He is told to not worry about the Urban League or Jesse Jackson, because other corporations have recently given them large donations. Here, Boots, the lead rapper, demonstrates the primacy of class struggle in the efforts to resist oppression. Mainstream Black organizations, as depicted here, are fundamentally inept when it comes to meeting the needs of poor Blacks. Their dependence on the money of the capitalist elite renders them little more than pathetic front organizations of petty bourgeois reformism.

In a wonderfully creative move (The Coup, 1994), listeners hear "J. P. Getty, David Rockefeller and Donald Trump" bust a few freestyle raps on "Pimps." At the behest of a female attendant, the millionaire heirs Rockefeller and Getty jettison their patrician accents for authentic rap lingo. The capitalist moguls brag about their riches and domination over the masses. Rockefeller explains that he can never lose because he made the rules. In the rap, the billionaires brag of pimping the masses—"hoes."

The capitalist rappers avoid Donald Trump, who lacks the blue-blooded, aristocratic genealogy of Getty and Rockefeller.

Undeterred, Trump busts a ragamuffin reggae style that he picked up while spending time with his property and friends—the Dauvaliers—in the Caribbean. The reference to the dictatorship of the Black despots of Haiti further speaks to the myopia of a race-based political dialogue. Rappers Boots and E-Rock, who unveil guns and commence their job of taking from the rich and giving to the poor, disrupt the Fortune 500 party (*The Coup*, 1994).

The last song of the trilogy, “Takin These” (*The Coup*, 1994), is a mellow cut that finds *The Coup* engaging in “Operation Snatch-back” because the capitalists’ profits have not been mutually beneficial. The revolution has begun. The laws created to protect the wealth of the elite no longer apply. The members of *The Coup* seize control of the means of production, and, equipped with arms stored in their Pinto hatchback, go to 53rd and Foothill—the location of an Oakland police precinct—where they do a drive-by shooting.

The idealized intercommunalist revolution of the lumpenproletariat is not entirely unique in hip-hop. Ice Cube, too, has rapped about robbing from the rich and giving it to “my people” (*Digable Planets*, 1996; Ice Cube, 1992; Paris, 1994). Also, some rappers such as Paris and *Digable Planets* have demonstrated that Newton’s theories of oppression and class struggle have influenced them. *Digable Planets*’s (1996) second LP was self-described as an “Intercommunalist Sound Service.” Released in the midst of the gangsta rap onslaught in 1996, the Grammy Award-winning group refused to glorify gangsta rap, and implored gangsters to cease the murder of Black people. “We call on the people,” the liner notes read, “to recognize the revolutionary movements of the people of Watts, LA in their gang truce.” These approaches are very different from those of the public opponents of gangsta rap, like Tucker, Dole, and others. Some rappers have spoken directly to Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker in their songs to express their distrust of the culture critics.

In the tradition of rappers who are critical of the typical, unimaginative, and simplistic lyrics of the average MC, Ras Kass (1996) released his first CD with a mission to imbue hip-hop with higher levels of consciousness and creative dexterity. Writing his lyrics in the midst of the fierce attacks on hip-hop and increased

social-program cutbacks initiated by the 104th Congress, Ras Kass introduces some keen observations of politics and music. He inveighs against the simple-minded gangsta rapper but simultaneously acknowledges the market for such rappers. True lyricists in hip-hop are ignored by the public because listeners cannot relate, he says. Elevating, he complains, is treated like "elevator music." Despite his efforts to introduce a substantive discussion of politics and society backed by dope rhymes and phat beats, the simple lyrics about killing, pimping, and drug selling invariably win a larger crowd. Mediocrity, he insists, is his nemesis, but ridicule is the "burden of genius." The industry, he explains, is part of the larger capitalist order, which is a game of "pimps and hoes." Moral responsibility does not make the world go around.

Despite his cynical look at the politics of hip-hop, Ras Kass (1996) displays his unyielding appreciation for it throughout his CD. In fact, his love of hip-hop inspires his attempt to salvage it and defend it against its detractors whose sincerity he doubts. Calling out Senator Bob Dole and C. Delores Tucker, he warns that he is not scared of their attacks. What the world needs, he argues, is less "free cheese" and more white-collar jobs. He also criticizes their emphasis on gangsta rap, while "white powder" brokers are "getting over." Here, Ras Kass criticizes the inequities of the justice system in meting out punishment for drug-related offenses. Crack convicts—mostly Black—automatically receive much harsher sentences than do those who are convicted for possession of similar amounts of powder cocaine, who are mostly White. Cocaine, of course, is needed to produce crack. Ras Kass's lyrics also reflect his disdain for political pundits who assume the role of moral crusaders but do little to address the fundamental causes of gangsta rap lyrics or who are reticent on other types of injustice in society. As he observes, people would rather work than receive welfare, if given the opportunity. But note that Ras Kass (1996) specifies the desire for jobs that provide livable wages, not entry-level positions at fast food restaurants. In a similar vein, female rapper Yo Yo (cited in Pfeiffer, 1996) explains that "rappers are a product of America. Attack the world rappers live in, not the words they use to describe it."

The most controversial rapper of the late 1990s, Tupac Shakur (1996), caught the ire of many anti-gangsta rap exponents before his death in a drive-by shooting in 1996. One of the most successful rappers in the industry, Tupac, an unabashed “thug” who had little problem attracting trouble outside of the studio, blasted C. Delores Tucker for trying to “destroy” him. He exclaims that she is worse than the others. Perhaps the racial affinity that Tucker and Tupac share underlies his insistence that she is worse than the White critics. Not to overlook White critics, he states that President Bill Clinton and Senator Dole are too old to understand the complexities of the “rap game.” Tupac implies that the generational chasm is one cause of the misunderstanding of hip-hop on the part of anti-gangsta rap crusaders.

By his fourth CD, *All Eyez on Me*, Tupac’s political fervor had dropped off considerably from the levels of his first CD, *2Pacalypse Now*. Tupac, toward the end of his career, chose to downplay his Black nationalist polemics while embracing the “thug life” that pervaded hip-hop in the early- and mid-1990s. Still, Tupac was keen on offering social commentaries to the public. “If these people actually cared about protecting the children like they say they do, they’d spend more time trying to improve the conditions in the ghettos where the kids are coming up,” Shakur said of Tucker, Dole, and others (Philips, 1996, p. D1). Others have given a more compelling political analysis of gangsta rap critics.

The “teacher” of hip-hop, New York rapper KRS-One (1995), also scrutinizes Dole and Tucker. KRS-One dropped a direct challenge to the critics of gangsta rap with his 1995 song “Free Mumia.” Rapping with the group Channel Live, KRS-One excoriates “house Negroes” who have waged battles against rap. Instead of attacking record companies, he suggests that they try to free Mumia. The cause of Mumia Abu-Jamal, the Philadelphia journalist who is on death row for the murder of a police officer, is very important, the rappers insist. Instead, “house niggas” like C. Delores Tucker are blinded by “cultural ignorance.” These leaders, insists KRS-One, are alienated from the youth and the important messages that many young people discuss. The rappers are critical of older Black leaders

(such as "J. Jackson") who proved to be traitorous to Blacks even before hip-hop was born. They do not limit their criticism to integrationist Black leadership. They also lyrically attack Rush Limbaugh, conservative culture critic and anti-rap pundit. Senator Dole, KRS-One explains, doesn't understand the young. Instead, Dole and others have blamed rappers for causing violence, but rappers state that America was violent before rap. Rappers, as noted above, are not the only ones in the hip-hop community who are at once critical of both anti-rap crusaders and the materialistic, gangsta, Mafioso hedonism of some artists.

Every major hip-hop magazine has voiced opposition to the popularization of drugs, misogyny, and drinking that pervades rap. Selwyn S. Hinds (1997), music editor of *The Source*, the most successful music magazine in monthly newsstand sales, wrote an open letter to C. Delores Tucker offering a critique of her campaign against "scarecrows" in the hip-hop industry. Hinds explains that "our culture reveres figures of violence" such as John Wayne and Al Capone. Although he admits that music has the power to influence behavior, he argues that deeper issues than Snoop Dogg cause violence. And whereas he does not support misogynist music, he encourages his writers to critique it. He blasts Tucker for "morally condescend[ing] when the cameras beckon." Moreover, she fails to "acknowledge that misogyny is a sickness that has plagued America for all 200 plus years of her existence, not simply the last 10 or so dominated by hip-hop." In the final analysis, he writes, "I find you both worrisome and confusing" as a "private citizen embarking on a witch hunt" under a "veil of righteousness" that is unable to disguise a troubling "hypocrisy" (p. 8). Other hip-hop writers have produced strong objections to gangsta, misogynist, materialistic rap.

The Internet zine *HEADz UP!* (Flash, 1996) expressed deep concern over "menaces to hip-hop" such as Sean "Puffy" Combs, CEO of Bad Boy Records. Flash (1996) charges Combs and other music executives with "killing an art form" with "unbridled sexual misogyny and a 'mack daddy/pimp' attitude." He rips on female rapper Lil Kim whose LP "ought to be wrapped in the same foil sheets used to put *Playboy* on magazine racks." Although he does not

endorse censorship, he insists that such saturation of morally questionable rap distorts the creative forces of the industry and marginalizes talented groups such as the Pharcyde, Brand Nubian, and womanist rapper Bahamadia.

De La Soul's 1996 LP, *Stakes is High*, was praised by *The Source* ("Artists of the Year," 1997) for helping to "initiate the war against the designer suit-wearing, Mafia wannabe MC who had eclipsed the drug dealing, gangbanging MC of the West Coast." De La Soul, the leading hip-hop magazine accurately notes, should be "receiving their full due as innovators of killing tired and senseless trends from the masses of hip-hop fans" (p. 52).

Without doubt, the misogyny, debauchery, and antisocial hedonism of some lyrics deserve to be attacked. But what may appear to be a sincere concern for the well-being of America's youth is often a guise of a more sordid and insidious attack on Black youth culture and its ability to critique, analyze, and provide commentary on society. That right wingers such as Newt Gingrich, Robert H. Bork, and others genuinely feel remorse and concern for the plight of poor, inner-city, Black youth is questionable, considering their positions on job training programs, civil rights, and various social services for the urban poor. Their attacks on rap appear to be little more than a guise of the traditional right-wing rhetoric of intolerance and race baiting. Also, critics who are Black liberals have shown an inability to transcend the narrow parameters of discussion centered around poverty, crime, and pathology, as described by some rappers. Providing more substantive criticism of the social, economic, and political apparatus that create the pathology described by rappers becomes a nonoption for detractors of rap. Instead, they resort to the simplistic pandering to fear and ignorance, resulting in myopic and limited understanding and analysis. To be sure, rap is an incredibly varied and complex genre of music, despite what anti-rap crusaders have argued. From feminists to misogynists, from Christian zealots to Muslims and horror-core rappers, hip-hop is perhaps more diverse in cultural expression than any other form of music in the United States. Unfortunately, rap appears much more monolithic in the coverage provided by the mainstream media and the most prominent critics of rap.

The hip-hop community, in the face of attacks from the Right and Left, has reacted with rebuke and critical analysis. Although it is far from monolithic, the hip-hop nation has demonstrated no tolerance for C. Delores Tucker, Bob Dole, or Robert H. Bork. Instead, critics of gangsta rap and sexist and criminal glorification have given a very articulate, fresh, and nonintimidating voice to hip-hop aficionados who appreciate hip-hop but are uncomfortable with the messages of some of their peers. Writers of major hip-hop magazines and several prominent artists have recognized the morally tenuous nature of some lyrics. They have demonstrated that rappers have a right to expression and simultaneously acknowledge the deeper causes of barbaric rap lyrics and the political agenda of anti-rap crusaders, thereby giving a new dimension to the discourse within the cultural wars.

NOTES

1. From "Millie Pulled a Pistol on Santa," written by Clinton, Cook, Huston, Jolicoeur, Mason, and Mercer. © 1991. Printed with kind permission from Prince Paul Music/Daisy Age/T-Girl Music LLC (BMI), Bridgeport Music, Inc.
2. From "The Pressure," written by Fareed, Muhamma, and Taylor. © 1996. Printed with kind permission from Bridgeport Music, Inc.
3. From "Stakes is High," written by Bobbitt, Brown, Jamal, Jolicoeur, Mason, Mercer, Wesley, and Yoncey. © 1996. Printed with kind permission from Daisy Age/T-Girl Music LLC (BMI), Dynatona Music/Warner Chappell Music (BMI), Ephey Music/Polygram Music (ASCAP), Warner Tamerlane Music (BMI).

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